

# Article

## Understanding protest action: some data collection challenges for South Africa

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### Abstract

The focus of this paper is a particular set of actions which have become broadly known as ‘service delivery’ protests. It considers various protest datasets currently being used to inform understandings of ‘service delivery’ protest action. The limitations of each of these databases are highlighted and discussed in order to stimulate thinking about the possible development of independent, critical and accessible sources of protest data. Recommendations are made as to the improvement of quantitative data sources on protest action. The paper argues that ‘service delivery’ is a complex phenomenon which requires further critical examination as well as rigorous and co-ordinated data-collection initiatives. It concludes that the development of comprehensive, informed and reliable data sources can support improved critical reflections on the meanings and consequences of ‘service delivery’ protest for purposes of transformation and development at community-level.

### Introduction

Despite a remarkable post-1994 transformation involving a whole new system of integrated and de-racialised local governance driven by a strong philosophy of developmentalism, the local government system is showing signs of being overwhelmed.<sup>1</sup> This is most clearly seen in the phenomenon of recurring and increasingly violent mass protest toward local government. Such protest action has assumed multiple forms including petitions, marches, demonstrations and violent confrontations, often displaying historical continuity with the rolling mass action of the anti-apartheid era which sought to ‘make the townships ungovernable’.<sup>2</sup> Government is increasingly recognising, and strategising about the destabilising effects of protest action on local governance processes, particularly in terms of the ability of

local government to fulfil its developmental mandate toward communities. Unfortunately, there is little by way of a comprehensive dataset which can support an accurate understanding of protest action. This paper raises questions about the quality of protest datasets currently being used to inform thinking and policy about protest action and argues that the absence of reliable and comprehensive data frustrates attempts to interpret protest action and strategise about its implications for local governance processes.

Protest action in South Africa is diverse and multi-faceted. It is undertaken by different, mostly urban, groupings such as labour, the unemployed, shack dwellers, informal traders, students, local communities and ordinary residents, whose grievances are related to issues of socio-economic justice. Within this protest-rich context, this paper focuses on those protests related to ‘service delivery’ which share the following characteristics: urban-based; spatially located in informal settlements or other low-income areas; utilising a particular set of tactics; no evidence of formal planning or alliances with institutions or elites; driven by goals of being heard by political authorities and encompassing a range of grievances related not only to ‘service’ needs but interconnected with wider issues of governance and government.

High levels of protest action are mainly aimed at and impact most directly on local government, the sphere of government closest to citizens. Protest action has tended to be largely focused away from other spheres of government which share the responsibilities of ensuring effective service delivery at local level. For citizens growing increasingly restless for change, local government may appear as the most immediate source of redress for their central concerns of transformation of the material conditions of their lives (Sinwell et al 2009). Government dissatisfaction was evident in the 2009 Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO)<sup>3</sup> Quality of Life Survey, which measured a wide range of issues such as levels of satisfaction with government services, poverty, socio-economic status, movement within the Gauteng City-Region (GCR)<sup>4</sup> and quality of life. When asked about government performance, 57% of respondents were satisfied with the national sphere, 50% were happy with provincial government, but only 40% replied that they were satisfied with local government. Delving deeper into the local government results, a total of 27% said that they were dissatisfied with the performance of local government and 13% responded that they were very dissatisfied. Moreover, local government received the lowest scores when respondents were asked what level of government had done the most to improve their quality of life with a score of 12%, compared to provincial level with 14% and

national scoring 47% (GCRO 2009).

There appears to be little recognition amongst communities that local government only has certain powers and functions to deliver services and that some of the dissatisfaction should be directed toward the other spheres of government (provincial and national) which also have a role to play in 'delivering services'. This finding concurs with qualitative research conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research (CSR) at the University of Johannesburg in 2009. It was undertaken in four protest 'hot-spots' (Piet Retief, Balfour, Thokoza, and Diepsloot) at the apex of violent protest action in 2009. The report concluded that there was no evidence that people were unhappy with the Zuma administration or the national policies of the ANC but rather simply that local government was the specific target of their grievance (Sinwell et al 2009:1).

Although protest action has tended to be viewed negatively, given its widespread associations with public disorder and violence, scholars acknowledge that it holds considerable value as an indicator of social change (Ramjee and van Donk 2011:15). This is borne out by protest action on a global scale and the accompanying extensive body of international literature which shows its long history in the repertoire of political actions of citizens. Protest is viewed as a potential means of socio-political transformation for disenfranchised or politically frustrated communities (Lipsky 1968, Gurr 1970, Klandermans 1997). Scholars have described contemporary protest as an extension of conventional politics by other means and an almost ubiquitous part of the contemporary political process (Norris 2002:2). There is merit to recognising protest as a political resource in South Africa<sup>5</sup> and this must involve nurturing and growing protest action as a site of study, with the requisite data and analysis to support it.

What is known about protest action in South Africa is derived from a growing body of research and scholarship as well as a number of disparate, largely qualitatively-based, initiatives to collect protest data (Ngwane 2010, Sinwell et al 2010, Alexander 2010, Vally 2009, Booysens 2009). Not all of it is academic. The state has amassed its own protest database under the auspices of the South African Police Service (SAPS). This database helps inform various governmental strategy and project-based initiatives undertaken to change public perceptions of ineffectiveness and address the multiple dilemmas in local government and governance. These include such initiatives as the now defunct Project Consolidate, the Planning, Implementation and Management Support Programme (deployment of

technical expertise to district municipalities), Project Viability, and the 2009 Local Government Turnaround Strategy (CoGTA 2009). However, despite substantial interest from government, civil society and academia to embark upon a comprehensive and robust approach toward understanding protest, there is no agreed-upon method for use on a routine, systematic basis to generate critical, high-quality data about protest action in order to inform effective response strategies toward protest. A preliminary assessment of the various datasets available for the study of protest action reveals that data sources and quality vary. Given that they are drawn largely from print and electronic media sources (and it is not always clear which ones) there are possibilities of bias and distortion. It is also acknowledged there may be missing data, raising questions about the validity and quality of analysis therein. Some definitive critical and independent data sources may well resolve the tensions in reconciling varying datasets.

### **‘Service delivery’ protest: a cautionary tale**

‘Service delivery’ protest action has evolved within the context of a wider post-1990s culture of protest (Ngwane 2010:1). Bond and Mayekiso describe the protest actions of the early post-apartheid years as ‘an upsurge of often spontaneous demonstrations, marches, boycotts, highway blockades, wildcat strikes, land invasions, inner-city building squats, sit-ins and occupations of factories and government offices, disruptions of neo-apartheid education, protests against (and by) public service providers (including kidnappings), mutinies by ANC cadres in the integrated defence and police forces, and on and on’ (1996: 40). Protest assumed an organisational form through trade unions such as Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) (Ballard et al 2006). Scholars have characterised social movements as a diverse grouping, with the dual objectives of mobilising the poor and marginalised and engaging with the state (Habib 2005:9). Ngwane raises the question of how the various forms of protest action may be understood, in terms of a broader vision of building a mass movement for social change (2010:19).

The dynamics of the phenomenon familiarly known as ‘service delivery protest’ have generally been understood by the public, within the context of local government failures or shortcomings in terms of, for example, community access to water, electricity, sanitation and basic infrastructure (McLennan and Munslow 2009). However, the term has been simplified and

homogenised to the extent that it has lost much of its political and analytic meaning. Statistics tend to be used uncritically in order to support evidence of ‘delivery’ or ‘non-delivery’ and often fail to capture the complex and varied reasons behind the protest.

The term ‘service delivery protest’ is thus loosely used to the detriment of analytic clarity. Having originated as a discourse of the public sector, it bears similarity to the apartheid-era catchphrase ‘township unrest’ which served then as an umbrella term for a diverse range of political actions such as rent and consumer boycotts, labour strikes and student revolts (Friedman 1987, Mayekiso 1996). Similarly, ‘service delivery protest’ is functioning as a catch-all term for multiple issues of governance and government. The messages of grievance emerging from protest action are far-ranging: lack of communication with municipal authorities, poor quality of services, allegations of nepotism and corruption, political in-fighting and problems with community development projects related to contracts and tenders (Booyens 2009:130). The drivers of protest actions often become enmeshed with broader national concerns about macro-structural issues such as poverty, land reform and unemployment. Cross-border protests and xenophobia have also featured in the configuration of ‘service delivery’ protest action (Alexander 2010). Research has consistently linked protest action to a lack of accountability by local councilors (Atkinson 2007, Booyens 2009, Sinwell et al 2009, Alexander 2010) although it is cautioned that ‘it is unclear to what extent the protests are an attempt to demand and extract accountability, or are rather reflections of popular frustration’ (Fakir and Moloï 2011:111). Friedman makes an important distinction between ‘service delivery’ and ‘public service’ and suggests that protest action is, in part, driven by the failures of participatory democracy (2009).

Similarly Seepe and Mthembu claim, ‘The vote-service-delivery discourse is paralysing as it encourages people to stand on the sidelines and expect that government will be an answer to all their problems. It does not suggest any action from the recipient of “service” and “delivery”, but an idle wait for these. The sooner we dispense with this discourse, the better’ (2011).

There is increasing recognition of the conceptual and practical weaknesses of the discourse of service delivery and the discursive shift needed for a counter-discourse to afford greater analytic and political clarity to the issues. Accordingly, Hlophe argues that ‘South Africa needs to adopt a conceptual and practical shift which downplays the discourse of “service delivery” in favour of a “productive” public sector’ (2010).

## **Protest datasets in perspective**

There is long-standing scholarly interest in protest action in South Africa. A large part of the academic literature produced on such activities is focused on the study of activist politics and social movements (Bond and Mayekiso 1996, Bond 2000, Habib 2005, Ballard et al 2006, Oldfield 2008). There is a growing body of qualitative work on protest action, often area and case-study based, which has led to a richness of depth and range of analysis about protest action (CDE 2007, Sinwell et al 2010, Fakir and Moloji 2011).

However quantitative data sources on protest action are less common. As protest tends to be viewed as an unconventional activity, quantitative data on protest activity is not as readily available as participation in conventional political activities, such as voter participation or membership of political parties. Given the urgent need to analyse, predict and strategise around protest, interest is growing, particularly from the side of government, in measurement of protest action and the cycles of protest.<sup>6</sup>

This section of the paper focuses on a specific set of quantitative data sources which have been purposively gathered and maintained in a database form by researchers in order to help measure and/or analyse protest action. Such data tends to be popularly drawn upon and quoted by a wide variety of sources, including government, in order to generate conclusions about protest action. The paper considers a number of protest datasets as generated by different sources; two of these data sources are generated by state institutions, namely, the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Spatial Viewer on Protest Actions (SPAVOPA) maintained by the Department of Human Settlements (DHS). We look also at the data generated by one private research company – Municipal IQ – as well as one activist-based source, the Centre for Civil Society (CCS).

### ***The Incident Registration Information System (IRIS) through the SAPS Crime Combating Operations Visible Policing Unit (VPU)***

The IRIS database is used as an official source of data for briefings to parliament and helps inform the thinking of national government on the level and severity of protest action. Access to the IRIS database requires the granting of official permission from the VPU head office in Pretoria. The SAPS website does not offer any information on the IRIS database. According to research by Vally, protest action is captured through a subset called ‘public gatherings’ (2009:3). With an interchange between terms such as ‘gatherings’, ‘processions’ and ‘demonstrations’ drawn from the 1993

Regulation of Gatherings Act, the subset appears weakly defined. It remains open to questions about the legality of the protests captured. It is not clear how the data captures the difference between gatherings deemed as ‘peaceful’ and those as ‘unrest-related’. These categories reside uncomfortably in the same subset as ‘legal’ and ‘illegal protests’ (Vally 2009:11).

### ***Municipal IQ***

The most widely quoted data source in the media, government and academic research is that of Municipal IQ, a private research company which brands itself as ‘a unique and web-based data and intelligence service specialising in the monitoring and assessment of all of South Africa’s 283 municipalities’ (Municipal IQ 2010). Municipal IQ maintains its own database, which began recording protest action in 2004. The database draws on media reports and academic research and is the basis of the popularly quoted ‘Hotspots Monitor’. However, the data is only available to subscribers and has to be accessed on a paid basis. This limits assessment of the quality of the database and also limits broader use of the data, including the long-term trend analysis which could inform strategic interventions in the management of protest action.

### ***The Centre for Civil Society (CCS)***

Based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, CCS monitors all forms of protest action on a national basis. The database is called the Social Protest Observatory. Protest briefings are posted on the Centre’s website and are captured on a compact disc. The database dates from 2005 and its sources include *The Sowetan*, *Daily Sun*, *Pretoria News*, *Cape Argus*, *Mail and Guardian*, as well as such electronic sources as *News 24* and the *World Socialist Web*. The database is also kept updated through a national network of activists and scholars connected to community and grassroots sources. The range of protest action captured by the CCS is broad. It includes public sector strikes, labour action, xenophobia-related protest, anti-crime demonstrations, and various community-based protests related to issues such as animal rights or the environment (Devenish 2011:3). While this database appears rich and comprehensive, it is limited by its style of data-capturing. Events are captured descriptively on the basis of what appear to be newspaper headlines and reflect subjective means of interpretation, such as ‘invasion of unused land’ or ‘malicious damage to property’ (CCS Social Protest Observatory Database).

*The Spatial Viewer on Protest Actions (SPAVOPA) maintained by the Department of Human Settlements (DHS)*

The DHS has shared its Spatial Viewer database with GCRO. The SPAVOVA is a DHS initiative to record housing and service delivery protests (including land availability) with a long-term objective to serve as an advisory and monitoring tool for housing and related services (DHS 2010). Service delivery protests are captured from media clippings sourced from the DHS Communication and Research Directorate, as well as Internet searches and other printed media, and mapped as a GIS layer.

The DHS SPAVOVA database has captured a comprehensive body of data using print and some electronic media sources. In compiling the database, the DHS has explained its experience of data capturing challenges from newspaper sources, including the problem of reporting of the same incidents with different geographical names. In order to circumvent the problem of possibly distorted information, the DHS methodology is to capture protest actions occurring in specific locales during a specific time period only once (email communication with Aubrey Matshego, April 6, 2011). Therefore, the database does not allow for an understanding of recurrent protest actions and accordingly, the levels of intensity and embeddedness in a particular area.

The relationship of the DHS SPAVOVA database to the SAPS IRIS database is unclear. It raises the question of possible duplication of resources by two national government departments.

Considering the various protest datasets, it is clear that variation exists. Not all datasets are equal, nor do all have equal validity and reliability. They differ in terms of sources, raising questions about the degree to which scholars accept media-based data as an adequate representation of the ‘reality’ of protest action. While events data from the media serve as useful empirical resources, questions about the reliability and validity of media reporting remain pertinent (Earl et al 2004:68-74). Datasets also differ in terms of access. Some datasets such as that of Municipal IQ or the SAPS IRIS database are either restricted or accessible only on a paid basis, while others are freely available. There are differences in terms of data capturing, with data extending over different time periods and sometimes with missing attributes or incomplete information. There is little evidence to suggest that the datasets have been cross-checked against other pieces of qualitative research, such as that generated by local or activist sources which may offer different perspectives on the conclusions offered by the media.

The variations in datasets highlight the need for accurate and methodologically-rigorous recordings of protest data.

### **Broad patterns and trends in protest action**

Here reference is made to some broad trends and patterns emerging from the current research (academic and applied) which collectively inform a broad understanding of the dynamics of contemporary protest action in South Africa.

The first such trend is that protest tends to be spatially located in informal settlements and former black townships (Alexander 2010:26). In more affluent areas, 'service delivery' protest has tended to assume the form of rates withholding or 'rates boycotts' (May 2011:96). These actions are, however, sporadic and show little evidence of medium- or long-term planning or of any alliances with elites or institutions. The underlying grievances driving the protest relate usually to basic services, but connect to wider issues of dissatisfaction with governance (Booysens 2009).

Second, the research suggests that protestors tend to be poor, un- or under-employed and residents of townships or informal settlements. They are usually area-based residents and community activists and include students and unemployed youth. According to Alexander, protest actions almost always include youth: 'a key feature of the protestors has been mass participation of a new generation of fighters, especially unemployed youth but also school students' (2010:25). It has been suggested that criminal elements play an inflammatory role in exacerbating the protests by initiating the destruction of public property. The criminality and violence that often accompany protest action has fed into government's perception of violent protest action as crime-related and it then underplays their concerns (Sinwell et al 2009:3).

Third, there appears to be an established repertoire of protest actions and one which draws on a tradition of protest actions employed against apartheid-era local governments. The protest is usually triggered by unsuccessful requests to meet ward councillors or municipal officials in order to share grievances, usually involving the prior drafting of memoranda and petitions. Research undertaken by the CDE (2007) in the Phumelela municipality in the eastern Free State and in Khutsong, in the Merafong municipality of Gauteng, suggests that protest action may often be a 'the last resort'. Further investigations may be needed to bear this out more clearly.

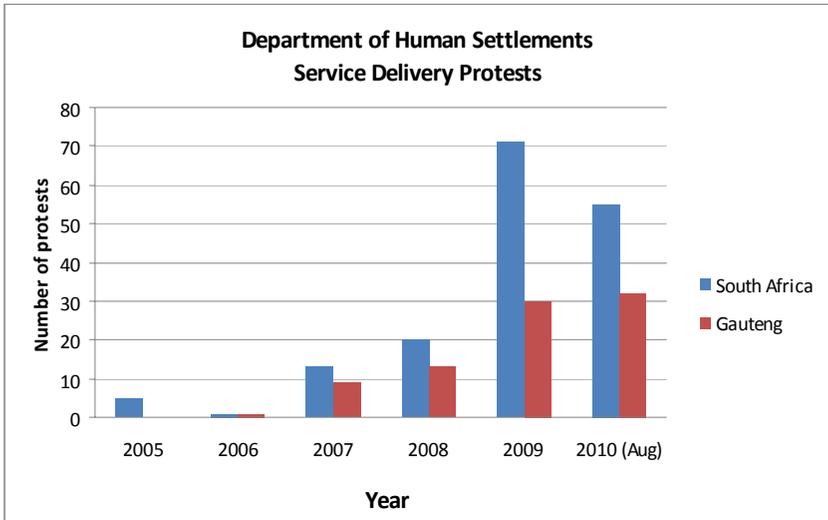
Fourth, the protest actions normally include one of more of the following:

toyi-toying, marches, intimidation of or physical attacks on councillors, the looting and/or burning of government infrastructure facilities, like municipal offices, libraries or vehicles. Media accounts show that these tend to be accompanied by the singing of protest songs and chanting of slogans related to the nature of the grievance at hand. Banners and placards reflect the intention of residents to seize power from perceived illegitimate authorities ('*Give Us the Office Keys now!*' read one banner held aloft by crowds during televised protest action in the town of Ficksburg in Free State in April 2011). Barricades may be built alongside roads, usually with burning tyres (Alexander 2010) and particularly along key commuter routes which often ensure maximum public and media coverage which in turn, compels political attention. Understanding protest in terms of political outcomes and effectiveness is an area for further research.

Fifth, the reactions of authorities to the protests focuses on the restoration of order and the safeguarding of public property. Several researchers have raised the issue of police brutality in the management of violent protests (Alexander 2010:32, Sinwell et al 2009:1, Omar 2006:7-12) and highlighted serious concerns that communities exercising their constitutional rights to protest may be simultaneously denied the right to safety and security. Information pertaining to the increase in police brutality at service delivery protests was recently presented to Parliament by the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD), a state body mandated to investigate misconduct and criminality allegedly committed by the police services (Ferreira 2011). The SAPS responded by developing a new policy on policing public protests, which calls for the re-establishment of a National Public Order Policing (POP) Unit within the SAPS (Mnisi 2011).

Finally, a uniform finding across the various datasets is that the incidence of protest is increasing. Using the DHS SPAVOPA database, the graph below (Figure 1) indicates protest incidence.

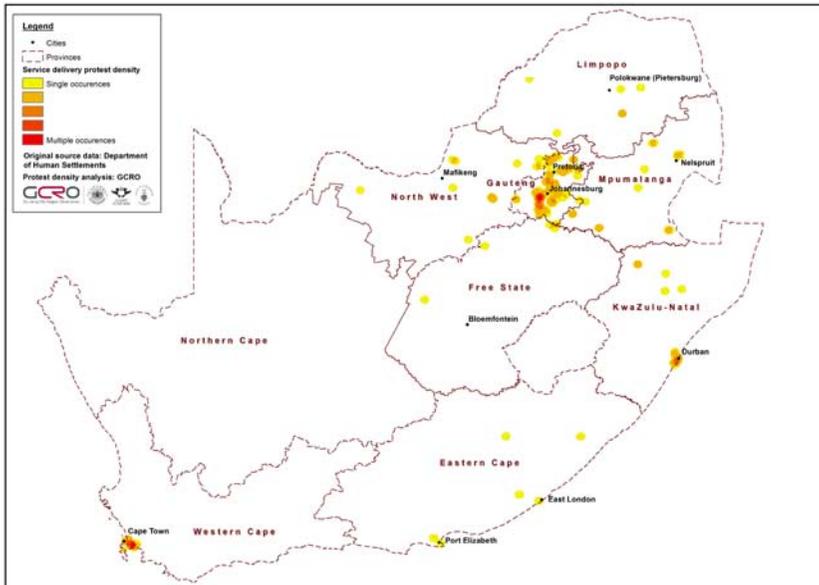
**Figure 1: Graph showing DHS percentage of national incidence of protest**



The graph indicates a steadily increasing trend of protest action in the period 2007-09. Protest spiked in 2009, with Gauteng registering the highest levels of protest. The total for all protests in 2010 as depicted in Figure 1 is marginally lower than 2009 as the DHS SPAVOPA database only extends as far as August 2010. For the period January to December 2010 a total of 104 service delivery protests were recorded for South Africa in the CCS database (CCS). This number is similar to the Municipal IQ’s Municipal Hotspots monitor, which recorded 111 service delivery protests for 2010, with Gauteng experiencing 40% of the protest action, followed by the Western Cape with 15%. The figure for 2010 represents the highest number of protests that Municipal IQ have recorded to date, and represents a slight increase from the 105 protests recorded in 2009 (Municipal IQ 2011). Despite the higher number of protests in 2010, both CCS and Municipal IQ reported that the protests were clustered in the first half of 2010, with a mid-2009 to mid-2010 peak. This suggests that protests tend to occur in waves, with the 2009 Municipal IQ protest data suggesting that protest action may increase several months after an election. (Devenish 2011, Municipal IQ 2011).

The distribution of protest on the national landscape is illustrated by the point density map (Figure 2) derived from the DHS SPAVOPA body of data. The map indicates density (ie the number of protests within a 10km radius in each area) over a six year period, from 2005 to August 2010. The density varies on a sliding scale from single occurrences represented in yellow to multiple occurrences of protest indicated in red.

**Figure 2: Service delivery protest point density heat map**

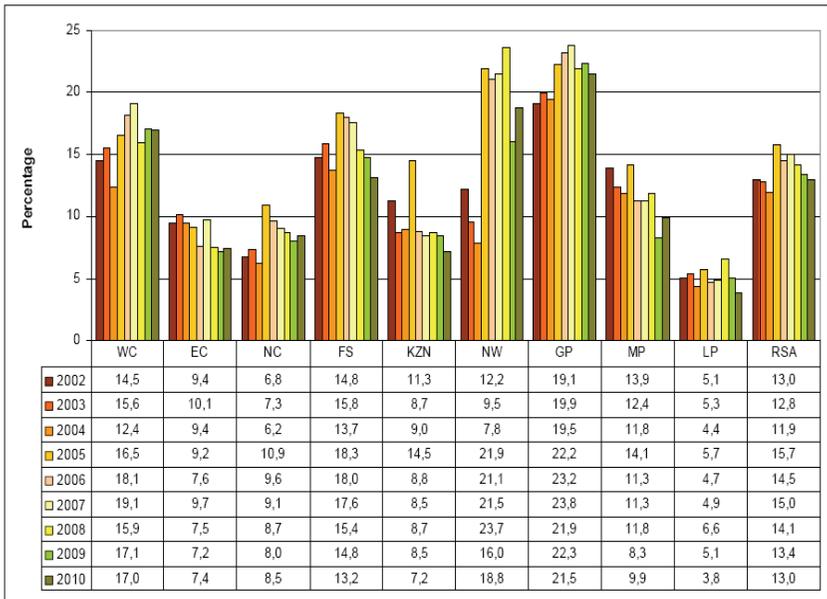


The map indicates protest activity being dispersed unevenly across South Africa with the highest levels in Gauteng, Cape Town and eThekweni. In recent years, protest action has concentrated predominantly in provinces with larger and well-resourced metropolitan areas (metros), such as in Gauteng and the Western Cape. Slightly more than half of the protests (51%) occurred in Gauteng and have increased every year. Seventy-five percent of all protests in Gauteng occurred in the three metropolitan municipalities within the province – City of Johannesburg (33%), followed by Tshwane (18%) and Ekurhuleni (14%).

Unsurprisingly, provinces with large numbers of informal settlements share a common denominator of high protest rates. The DHS SPAVOPA has

concluded that many of the protests have occurred in informal settlements. This finding is shared by Municipal IQ which stated that 37% of protests have occurred in informal settlements (Municipal IQ 2009). The 2011 General Household Survey conducted by Statistics South Africa indicates that informal settlements are strongly concentrated in the provinces of Gauteng, Free State, North West and Western Cape (Figure 3 below).

**Figure 3: Percentage of households living in informal dwellings, 2002 - 2010**



Given that the largest concentration of informal settlements is in Gauteng (21.5%) likely explains why it leads the way in terms of protest activity (StatsSA 2010). The combination of rapid urbanisation and high rates of immigration have strained the capacity of municipalities to meet urban service and infrastructure needs, particularly within the context of planned upgrades or new urban development programmes. Given the generalised conditions of vulnerability and frustration which exist in informal settlements, the potential for violence and xenophobic conflict therein therefore remains high (du Plessis 2006:180-206).

Gauteng's status as a protest 'hot-spot' is predicated on its substantial resource base and levels of economic activity and the hopes and expectations projected onto it by poor and marginalised people. Although not included in the SPAVOPA database, cross-border conflicts driven by the end goals of incorporation into better-resourced provinces have generated sustained levels of protest action. Khutsong is well-researched as a case study of a violent, five year long rebellion which resulted in the township being finally relocated from the North West and reincorporated into Gauteng (Matebesi and Botes 2011:4-21). The Free State has only recently begun to decrease its high protest rates. In 2007 its protest rates were similar to Gauteng. It was a site of sustained violent protest in the period 2004-2007 with a peak occurring in 2005, focused on a crisis in water and sanitation provision in the rural municipality of Phumelela in eastern Free State (CDE 2007). The Free State also experienced renewed protest action in 2011 in the eastern Free State town of Ficksburg (IOL News, May 13, 2011).

Perceptions of large metros such as the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) may well influence the likelihood of protest action occurring in metros. For example, Municipal IQ concludes that urban settings may appear conducive to perceptions of affluence and poverty, given the proximity of wealthier urban neighbours (Municipal IQ 2007). The relative deprivation thesis is evidenced by the predominance of Gauteng Province as the hub of protest activity, followed by the Western Cape. Given that Gauteng and the Western Cape have the highest rates of protest, the distribution of protests within the two provinces may support the suggestion that informal settlements on the fringes of urban areas are disproportionately more likely to engage in protest action.

Of course the conclusion that protest has a mostly urban focus is largely based on media coverage. Given that rural information and news tends not to receive prominent coverage by the media it is possible to surmise that protest action may be under-counted and under-estimated in rural areas. This can be seen as further validation of the need for objective and rigorous research which can contribute toward a comprehensive dataset.

Earlier work by Nyar and Wray in 2009 examining protest activity used 2001 census data at the ward boundary level to derive an indicator-based poverty index to indicate the intersection of poverty with protest (2009). The index was based on a poverty index developed by Strategy and Tactics for the Gauteng Provincial Government poverty targeting strategy in 2003 (Jennings et al 2003). It is constructed from ten indicators that measure

unemployment, female-headed households, level of education, income, dwelling type, crowding, and access to services such as water, sanitation, electricity and refuse removal (see Annexure A).

This work concluded that the highest levels of poverty are located in the rural areas of Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, and within the boundaries of the previous homelands. Gauteng is less poor than the rest of South Africa, and again this suggests that service delivery protests tend not to occur in areas with high percentages of poverty. In re-examining a fuller spread of national data in 2011, it may be concluded that protest action is not driven by the poorest of the poor, and in municipalities with the worst records of service delivery. Instead it tends to be the better performing urban municipalities which show high levels of protest action. This appears to be supported by Municipal IQ's database of socio-economic municipal profiles in South Africa.

### **A Way Forward for Protest Datasets**

It should be clear from the above that none of the current databases can be considered as authoritative data sources on protest action in South Africa and this paper argues that until work is initiated towards developing an independent and critical means for effectively recording protest data, no definitive and authoritative conclusions about protest action can be reached.

One particular weakness of the data is that they are based almost exclusively (with the possible exception of the SAPS IRIS database) on newspaper sources. While there is an established tradition of deriving information from newspaper sources, there are limitations to the use of such data; for example, under-reporting and bias. Significant news items on protest action may be bypassed in favour of other larger, more prominent news. The choice of newspaper coverage is often shaped by such variables factors as editorial choice, competition over newspaper space, or even proximity of the protest to the news agency. Critics argue that events tend to be better-reported when they resonate simultaneously with other high-profile socio-political concerns (Earl et al 2004:69). We may well find that electoral cycles influence a more even spread of protest event coverage.

Currently there are no shared standards on what constitutes a good selection of reliable news sources. It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which the findings have been influenced by uneven patterns of media distribution. While the various datasets acknowledge their newspaper sources to differing degrees, the main newspaper sources are English and

Afrikaans newspapers aimed at a mostly urban and literate readership. Indigenous African-language newspapers may well capture and interpret event data differently.

On the basis of the quality of the protest datasets available for consideration, this paper argues for the initiation of a debate regarding the quality of protest datasets. At a minimum, this will involve cleaning up existing datasets in order to make them as error-free as possible. This would place greater responsibilities on data-capturers to remain particularly rigorous about such issues as recording geographical place names correctly, avoiding the repeated capture of the same incidents, identifying inconsistencies, data gaps and ambiguities in terminology used, etc.

Standardisation of database attributes is one means of ensuring greater validity of the data. This should include a standardisation of definitions used in the datasets. For example, challenging uncritical representations of protest action, and ascertaining a common understanding of the term ‘service delivery protest’, must be an integral part of the data- collection process.

Existing datasets imply that there is space for much greater sharing of information and resources. This would involve the inclusion and cross-checking of quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources, such as the growing body of qualitative work on protest action from academics and researchers. This would add a richness and complexity to the data which is lacking in the current predominant use of media-based data. There is a powerful rationale at hand for employing a triangulation approach, which involves a variety of research methods and approaches in order to provide a more detailed and balanced picture of protest action and establish the highest levels of confidence in the data (Denzin 1978). The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in datasets is likely to enhance the accuracy and completeness of data and strengthen research results.

Critical independent high-quality data, which is as free as is possible from subjective biases, needs to become an urgent priority. The means for sourcing such data remains a compelling question for further study and debate. This may be an appropriate subject for discussion with both the state and the research/academic community and, particularly, researchers or research institutions with an established track record of independent monitoring and analysis.

Given the prognosis for future continuing protest action, a system of

independent monitors similar to those employed for the purposes of observing and recording political violence in the first decade of South Africa's democracy could be an option. This would serve the dual function of an early warning system and a politically neutral means of recording protest activity. A system of independent monitoring would offer a degree of immediacy and consistency to data that current newspaper-based reporting data does not allow. It would help to keep data up to date with constant monitoring. It would also provide the benefits of increasing accuracy and avoiding duplication. An important rationale for such a system of independent monitoring would be avoiding bias and maintaining objectivity. This kind of neutrality on the part of data capturing would help ensure against any possible claims of conflict of interest such as that faced by the SAPS (Vally 2009). Such a system of independent monitoring would help increase the validity of the data and help maintain the highest standards of data integrity.

The paper is aware that the idea of a system of independent monitors is a large undertaking. It requires political commitment as well as funds to support it. Furthermore, it requires a strong base of expertise in the form of monitors and researchers with analytical skills as well as technical proficiency in database management. It would involve establishing field monitoring systems and training methodologies. A starting point for conceptualising and initiating such a system of independent monitoring may be a process of mutual dialogue between a set of key stakeholders such as government, the private sector and civil society.

## **Conclusion**

This paper recommends a rigorous and comprehensive system of data collection which employs a range of methods and approaches, in order to make for a more complete, contextual and accurate portrayal of the protest action phenomenon. Ideally the paper is proposing a start toward building the design of a dataset which has strong internal and external reliability and validity as well as procedures to decrease potential biases within the research. It is time to begin a thoughtful discussion about the quality of protest action datasets if we are to address solutions toward the amelioration of protest action.

## **Notes**

1. The state of local government affairs is succinctly addressed in the report assessing the state of local government by the National Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) *State of Local*

*Government in South Africa: Overview Report, November 2009.*

2. The call to ‘make the townships ungovernable’ was made in 1986 by the exiled African National Congress (ANC) as part of its two-stage revolutionary programme to politicise townships and break down established institutions of law and order and all forms of government authority.
3. The GCRO is a partnership between the University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG). It is mandated to build a knowledge and data base so as to maximise the developmental trajectory of the Gauteng Province and the surrounding region of towns and cities which make up the area known as the Gauteng City-Region (GCR).
4. The Gauteng City-Region essentially refers to a planning concept adopted by the Gauteng provincial government intended to develop the province toward the status and vision of a global city-region. The basis of the city-region vision is an understanding of how the network of political, social and economic relationships linking the province to the surrounding region of towns and cities, helps contribute to the regional economy. The vision of the Gauteng City-Region is elucidated in the policy document named the Gauteng City-Region Perspective *A Golden Opportunity: Building Gauteng as a Globally Competitive City Region* (GPG 2004).
5. The seminal work of Michael Lipsky on protest, arguing for protest as a mode of political action by unconventional means and drawing on the resource mobilisation perspective, provides compelling reasons for why protest action warrants study by political scientists.
6. Measurement of protest is of direct interest to policymakers in the interest of undertaking strategic interventions to ameliorate the effects of protest on local government and communities.

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## Annexure A

Poverty index showing 10 indicators and their corresponding definitions, adapted from Ross Jennings, Moagi Ntsime and David Everatt (2003) A poverty targeting strategy for Gauteng. Gauteng Provincial Government.

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Female-headed households	Proportion of households headed by women
Illiteracy	Proportion of population (15+) who have not completed Std 5/Grade 7
Rate of unemployment	Proportion of the economically available population who are unemployed
Household income	Proportion of households with no annual income
Crowding	Proportion of households sharing a room with at least one other household
Dwelling type	Proportion of households classified informal or traditional
Sanitation	Proportion of households who do not have a flush or chemical toilet
Water	Proportion of households who have no tap water inside dwelling or on site
Electricity	Proportion of households who do not have electricity for lighting purposes
Refuse removal	Proportion of households whose refuse is not removed by local authority